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ABSTRACT

An attempt to explain the behavior of local, state and national teacher organizations by reference to the ideological basis for their activities, this paper links professionalism and excellence to previous organizational activity and demonstrates their continuity. Significant topics include the professionalization of teaching amid societal attempts to deprofessionalize other professions, such as medicine and law, in response to corporate pressure; residual effects of Puritanism; and the feminization factor in the trivialization of teaching within a corporate, as opposed to collegial, context. (Author/JD)

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THE IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF TEACHER ORGANIZATION

or

Why We Do What We Do

James H. Sutton

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THE IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF TEACHER ORGANIZATION

or

Why We Do What We Do.

by Jim Sutton, Director,
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I. Origins: The Middle Ages.

In the beginning, there was no profession. Teachers tutored individual clients, much as piano teachers might give lessons today. As practitioners settled in urban areas, their numbers and reputations increased. As the number of clients increased, students travelled from long distances to study, and a shortage of lodging occurred. When rents went up, tempers flared. Violence between town and gown was commonplace. The records of the time report assaults, duels, riots and arson. In one instance, students burned down their lodgings and moved to another town.

Having become dependent on fees for income, teachers found themselves at the economic mercy of their students. Those unruly students who burned their lodgings and moved elsewhere found their teachers following them. When students expressed disgust in less dramatic ways, they still got results. For they created a union, the student guild, to represent their interests with landlords, local officials, the Church and the Crown.

They used this power against their teachers. In places, a student, armed with a bell, could ring it whenever he felt his class was over. At the bell, any student could request a poll of the class to determine whether the teacher had been prepared and should be paid that day. Since the realities of student life placed beer ahead of tuition, teachers might be unpaid regardless of the quality of instruction. Teachers responded to these tuition strikes by creating a union of their own, the faculty guild.

The power of these guilds was mutually overlapping. Students might refuse to pay an instructor who had not been prepared, but now faculty could refuse to certify students who had not paid their teachers or who had failed to complete the curriculum. The faculty's clout was the baccalaureate degree. The degree meant that one had completed a curriculum and could teach for pay in Europe. Only those with the degree could teach. The guilds and universities were closed shops.

We date the original universities from the time when their teachers take concerted action to organize in their own interest. It is ironic that they should have organized against their own students. But this is consistent with the origin of the other learned professions which organized to limit the leverage of their clients. All the professions begin as unions seeking to

control the market for their labor. We believe otherwise because we like to make distinctions about the social class, but such distinctions are purely social. The difference between a union and a profession is not in function, but in legitimacy. A profession is a union which has achieved legitimacy because of a failure of memory. Unions become professions when people forget that they are unions. But they are merely opposite sides of the same coin. Those who believe that professionalism is inimical or antithetical to unionism are deceived by lack of knowledge about the origin of the teaching profession.

II. The American Plan.

The first public school in the U.S. was established by Puritans. They were not generous or tolerant. True, they believed in freedom of religion, but only for those whose beliefs were the same as their own. They exiled Roger Williams for disagreeing on a minor point of theological disputation. He, for his part, was so relieved to be free of them that he named the first unsettled place in his way "Providence." And so it must have seemed to him; for Roger Williams, like H. L. Menken after him, knew that Puritans live in mortal peril that someone, somewhere might be happy.

Perhaps the Puritan ministers who founded the Latin School were dour, untrusting souls. That they were devout is unquestioned. They lived in fear of God and lived to put fear into everyone else. They were the Ayatollas of their time. Supreme and unquestionable in religious, civic and moral matters, they set out to perpetuate a theocracy by creating a school. True to their lights, they declined to delegate responsibility to others. They did not view their lay teachers as invested with sufficient doctrinal purity to be trusted with the development of a curriculum, the teaching of morals, or the operation of a school, except, of course, as minions under discipline. Their attitude, familiar today, finds its expression in the very institutional device invented by them to enforce their lack of trust. We call this device a schoolboard.

It would be wrong to generalize from a single example. The Colonies were settled by thieves as well as saints. Still, the pattern set by Boston in 1635 remains pandemic today. Although Puritan theocracy was replaced by mercantilism in the Federal Period, by industrialism in the Nineteenth Century and by corporatism in our own, teachers are still employed in a setting whose major characteristic is its reluctance to empower teachers with sufficient authority to establish the basic conditions of effective practice.

Although autonomy has varied with time and setting, there has never been a time when school teachers in the U.S. have enjoyed the perquisites of a profession. Our system, an anomaly based on historic accident, has always been characterized by a strong local authority which makes decisions about professional

matters on which it has little or no expertise, even after long service. This is not how it is done in the rest of the civilized world. Few nations have schoolboards. The anomaly has led some to suggest that the parochialism implicit in schoolboards may be inimical to educating children for democracy. This point-of-view has its champion in Mark Twain, who writes, "First God created idiots; that was for practice. Then He created school boards."

III. Is Teaching a Profession?

I am not asking whether teachers are professionals. Teachers have the responsibilities of professionals, and they fulfill them in ethical and professional ways. One need look no further than the nearest kindergarten to see the ethics and methods which permeate teaching nowadays. Children are tested routinely against long strings of behavioral objectives to determine developmental status so that remediation can be provided at the earliest opportunity. Such procedures, and their success, indicate a high degree of commitment; an understanding of psychology; extended preparation in applying specialized skills; and faithfully executed responsibilities. Teachers are professionals.

But teaching is not a profession. In most schools, teachers have no right to set a grade which is immune from mutation by a schoolboard. Teachers rarely have the right to establish the curriculum, although they are the only ones licensed by the state to do so. Intrusions by amateurs into the profession are so pervasive that teachers are often denied the civil rights enjoyed by others. As public schools operate today and as they have always operated in the U.S., teachers are personnel who have the responsibilities of a profession, but not its rights.

Teaching in America lacks the formal characteristics of a profession. Teachers do not set standards for entry into practice; enforce ethics; establish the parameters of practice; operate free of interference by amateurs or the state; enjoy status or a professional wage; control fees or hours; have individual clients; accredit preparation programs; operate as a team in the professional setting; have the assistance of many skilled assistants or specialists; or exercise such other exclusive prerogatives as are routinely enjoyed by other professions.

Teachers are rarely invited to participate in decisions which affect them. Few of them participate in the governance of learned organizations, and they represent only a tiny minority of the governing boards of regional agencies which accredit schools. In many states, only teachers and felons are barred from serving on local or state boards of education. The recent national reports about education also treat teachers as superfluity. Where an attempt has been made to include teachers, the profession is never in a majority. More energy has been spent co-opting the profession than empowering it.

In some ways, teaching is a profession. Teaching has a body of organized knowledge which is recognized as its own. It requires an extended period of academic preparation. It cannot be reduced to units or piecework. It enjoys a committed and altruistic body of practitioners. Teachers have political power, like their medieval antecedents, and use it like other professions to advance their economic and professional interests. Teachers are organized, and they are no less professional for it. Since organization is central to a profession, to be unorganized would be unprofessional.

Despite these characteristics, teaching lacks the prerogatives of medical doctors, lawyers, accountants, plumbers, hairdressers or watchmakers. Reasons are routinely offered for this invidious distinction. Some say that teachers are public employees who operate in a public setting, and that, therefore, they should be subject to more public control than other professions. But many doctors and lawyers are employed by the public. They do not have fewer or inferior professional rights because they work for the state.

The idea that teachers are an inferior profession because they work for the public is a variant of the argument used by the Puritan ministers of Boston. It denies professional rights on the basis of the parochial needs of the employer. Such considerations are not legitimate for professionals who are subject to a code of performance and ethics other than the employers' own. Professionals are not personnel merely because it is in their employer's interest to treat them as such. Being a professional means having special rights as well as special responsibilities. This principle is so important to public welfare that our states have provided for them by statute. Denying teachers the prerogatives of a profession because they are public employees denies them the right to be a profession at all.

Some say there are too many teachers to permit professional status. This, too, is a variety of the Puritans' gambit. It assumes that an empowered establishment may deny authority to those whom it views as inferior, tainted, unworthy, incidental or expendable. Granting rights to large numbers of people is frequently impractical to those in authority. But justice is not attenuated by the number of the aggrieved or dispossessed. Professional status is not dependent on numbers.

IV. The Illegitimate Profession.

Why the nation trivializes teaching is explained by who teachers are. Teachers are women. About two-thirds of elementary and secondary teachers are female. Nursing is female, and it, too, is unlegitimated. Neither enjoys status, autonomy or professional compensation. Both have professional obligations without professional rights.

Until this century, women were not allowed in senior professions. But, recently, women have begun to enter these professions in number. But the admission of large numbers of women has had a curious outcome. When enough women are admitted to a profession to alter its balance in gender, the profession's prestige declines, and salaries go down. This trend is clear in law and medicine. It occurs, in part, because women are viewed as second-class.

Society does not yet honor women's professions because it does not yet honor women. This pattern of bias is circular, for it affects and assures that teachers and nurses will have less status, less compensation, less autonomy -- than other professionals or personnel. Teaching is demeaned and trivialized because it is female. This, too, is attributable to Puritans.

A feminization factor explains why faculty in higher education have achieved status, autonomy, prestige and legitimacy while school teachers have not. Two-thirds of college teachers are male, and the upper academic ranks are still solidly male. Rank has its privilege, and privilege has its rank.

The feminization factor also explains why attempts to elevate teaching are occurring at this time. The movement to upgrade teaching is coincident with the movement for women's rights. Both are concerned with empowerment, legitimacy, just compensation and autonomy. Both challenge and seek to transform Puritanical mores and customs. Both have been resisted. Neither has been realized.

Opposition to autonomy for women is part of education's history. Seventy-five years ago, most principals and almost all superintendents were women. Today, most principals and almost all superintendents are men. When the profession began to pay enough to raise a family, women were swept from positions of authority. A compensation system which discriminated against women was established. In the absence of salary schedules, women were paid less because, as women, they were presumed to have less need. Where salary schedules existed, these were "double" schedules, paying elementary teachers, who were women, less than secondary teachers, who were men.

Professions and unions work to eliminate internal inequities. Teachers' organizations eliminated gender-based compensation policies by inventing comparable worth thirty-five years before the term itself was invented. But other bias cannot be eliminated because it reflects society at large. Economic bias against women has been consistent and pervasive throughout the history of both American society and its educational system. It is part of our Puritan heritage.

The bias against economic autonomy for women has not changed. Because it remains, one expects that recent attempts to raise the salaries of teachers will be used against women.

Equal opportunity will be cited to justify reducing the percentage of teachers who are female. This is ironic in that equal opportunity was not considered a problem as long as teaching paid a sub-professional wage. The elimination of bias does not consist of punishing those who are its victims.

Because women are victims, we can predict that they will continue to be denied access to senior positions. Secretary Bennett of the U.S. Dept. of Education has noted that 72% of the nation's principals will be leaving the profession in the next decade. He has proposed that schools be managed by retired businessmen and military officers. These persons, almost all male, would be allowed to practice without preparation or experience.

One can ask how hiring people without preparation can strengthen a profession. One should ask whether a profession which allows anyone to practice is a profession at all, for this is a corporate model for personnel, not a professional model. It demeans and trivialize the profession. It assumes, for example, that Gen. Patton could have been effective as a principal. But one need not ask about the proposal's effect. Now that women have a chance to become principals because of high turnover, the chief education officer of the U.S. wants to abolish the position. Consistency is typical of Puritans.

V. The Mission.

Although teachers are professionals, teaching is not a profession. Since teachers do not enjoy the prerogatives of a profession, it follows that a teacher organization exists to create a profession. This is what the NEA and its affiliates have been doing for fifteen years. We have been organizing power and using it to pass laws which give teaching the prerogatives of a profession.

Collective bargaining, for example, is merely a way of insuring professional autonomy within a corporate setting. It provides teachers with some control over wages, hours and other conditions of employment. These are professional matters, and every profession seeks to have authority over them. Collective bargaining is merely a corporate solution to a corporate problem in a corporate setting which lacks collegiality. It does not often occur where collegiality truly exists. In the words of the American Association for University Professors, "Collective bargaining is an additional means of insuring academic freedom." In other words, it's a basic professional right. It has been such a right since the Fourteenth Century.

So it is with the other initiatives which cause consternation among the defenders of the status quo. The involvement of teachers in upgrading state retirement programs is a professional concern. Every profession provides for its members in their dotage. This was, in fact, a major obligation of the medieval guilds. What is new is that a public profession is seeking to

establish and advance its interests in a legislative forum. Contemporary Puritans find this disconcerting.

Teachers' organizations have obtained statutory protection relating to tenure. Every profession provides for job security. Teachers' groups have lobbied for special education and pre-kindergarten programs. Every profession supports opportunities for the expanded practice of the profession.

Teachers' organizations routinely support appropriations for education. Every profession seeks to maintain the financial viability of its institutional infrastructure.

Teachers' organizations have been seeking individualized instruction for not only the disadvantaged or disabled child, but for the average child. Every profession seeks to improve the efficacy of its prescriptions upon its clients.

Teachers' groups have been seeking a professional wage for professional work; professional control over the learning environment at the building level; control over entry, licensure and accreditation of preparation programs; and higher standards of practice. These are central to every profession, and every profession which is seen as legitimate is expected to advance and promote them.

In seeking to create a profession by statute where none exists, teachers' organizations have created departmentalized programs. A political action and lobbying effort is maintained in state agencies and with legislative bodies. It exists to obtain such rules and statutes as may be necessary to create a profession. Every profession seeks to represent its interests to government.

Organizing and membership programs create power and insure economic viability for the organization. Every profession seeks to create power to defend and promote its economic and professional interests.

Teachers rights programs insure that rights relating to job security are enforced. Every profession seeks to insure job security and the right to practice the profession according to professional standards and free from interference by amateurs.

Programs in instruction and professional development provide professional information which is not available from other sources and seek to impact the programs of those who provide continuing education to practitioners. Every profession provides for renewal.

The organization maintains publications and a program in public relations. Every profession seeks to express itself to itself and to its public.

The organization supports its objectives with analysis and research. Every profession seeks to advance its interests on the basis of evidence.

The organization supports collective bargaining and contract maintenance through a viable procedure for adjudicating infractions. Every profession seeks to have authority over basic conditions of employment in the local setting.

All professions conduct such programs, and they do so for the same reason: To defend and promote the economic and professional interests of members. But teaching has a special problem. It is not recognized as a legitimate profession and lacks the prerogatives of a profession. The purpose of teacher organizations today is to create a profession where none exists. This is done by organizing power to realize statutes which confer the prerogatives of a profession on teaching.

Teachers' groups differ on emphasis. When the AAUP says, "Collective bargaining is an additional means of insuring academic freedom, it emphasizes the word "additional." The NEA emphasizes "means" and the AFT stresses "collective." These differences, while real, are matters of style, not mission. All attempt to empower practitioners at the local level for the exercise of their professional prerogatives. An established profession can achieve this by custom; an illegitimate profession passes laws.

VI. Prognosis.

Societies have a pat answer for upwardly mobile groups which are seeking legitimacy: They say no. Consider the reaction of the French nobility to the aspirations of the bourgeoisie: benign neglect and malign contempt. The result was the French Revolution.

So it will not be easy for teachers to achieve the prerogatives of a profession, even if circumstances were favorable. And they are unfavorable. For many years, the political philosophy of the federal government has been to reduce expectations. Like Horace Walpole, Britain's first prime minister, our politicians are eager to do nothing and to make it retroactive.

Then, too, teachers are seeking to become a profession at a time when society is busy attempting to deprofessionalize existing professions. Insurance companies are seeking to limit the rights of doctors by attempting to bracket fees. They are doing this by establishing alternate delivery systems, like Health Maintenance Organizations; by inflexible fee structures for services which are insured; and by lobbying changes in income tax laws relating to the deductibility of medical expense. While these are designed to limit the cost of medical care, they also limit the autonomy of doctors.

Insurance companies are attempting to limit the practice of lawyers. Complaints about the high cost of tort liability has become a national issue. One is assaulted regularly by horror stories about "deep pockets" and irresponsible juries. This, too, is a case where the cure for a corporate problem involves the limitation of a professional privilege.

Nowadays, most professions have been absorbed into large corporations. Actuaries and accountants are becoming rare in private practice. Architects, doctors, lawyers and engineers are taking employment in settings other than the professional corporation. And it is not far-fetched to suppose that when the computer, which has liberated these professions, makes teaching less labor-intensive, even teaching may become absorbed by conglomerates.

We live in a time when corporatism and professionalism are competing for scarce talent and resources. It is also a competition of ideologies. In a very real sense, the corporate ethic is working to replace the professional ethic, just as the professional ethic replaced the theocratic ethic of the Middle Ages. But corporatism is distinctly modern. Professionalism belongs to an older, feudal order. As the power of corporations expands, the power of professions declines.

Meanwhile, teachers are attempting to achieve professional status at a time when the autonomy and prerogatives of other professions has been declining. It is remarkable that the attempt is being made at all. It is more remarkable that it has been succeeding. In the past fifteen years, great progress has been made in creating a profession. Legislation involving collective bargaining, tenure, retirement, self-governance through teacher-controlled boards of standards, special education for disabled children, comparable worth, and many other areas have been enacted. Corporate America has discovered that it cannot hope to compete economically unless public education is improved. National commissions are saying that public education cannot be improved unless teachers are given the prerogatives of a true profession over conditions of local practice. There is progress.

But there is also reaction. For it is not coincidence that teachers have been blamed for education's shortcomings when they are seeking recognition as a profession. It is not coincidence that the "Nation at Risk" report was issued soon after teachers began to ask that the federal government assume greater responsibility for the financing of schools. It is not coincidence that the government answers the call for greater finance of public schools with proposals to increase assistance to private schools. It is not coincidence that national committees would fill schools with those who have no professional preparation when the teaching profession has begun to exert political will effectively. These are all reactions to the profession's success in advancing its aspirations.

VII. Manifest Destiny.

Why does America have a love/hate relationship with its teachers? The reason is that teaching has political consequences. It is not merely that teaching shapes children which makes it suspect. It is suspect because teaching is a political act.

The nature of this act is not obscure. The pre-condition for the effective practice of the profession is the habit of mind we call moderation. Unless a teacher is open to opposing and unpopular views, the result is not teaching, but training, indoctrination or brain-washing. Moderation has never been popular. Remember Socrates.

There are those for whom training, indoctrination and brain-washing are the desired outcomes. We find them in autocracies at all periods of history. For their regimes, education - a "drawing forth" - is not only inconvenient, but treasonous. Where tyranny is the teacher, the only lesson is conformity. This is true whether extremism exudes from the Left or Right, or is sacred or secular.

Consider history in Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, Cuba, Angola, Viet Nam, Iran: The first victims were teachers. Their moderate habit of mind was inconvenient to those with a different agenda. It is not surprising that those who have no use for moderation have no use for moderates.

This explains why immoderate governments attack, discredit and divide teachers. Moderates are a threat to extremists, and the customary response of extremists to a threat is to attack. Indeed, extremism is extremism because it believes that all opposition can be eliminated by the use of sufficient political or physical force. Violence is the sincerest form of Puritanism.

Our danger is apparent if we notice that teachers are the nation's only large and organized group of political moderates. Once the United Auto Workers filled this role, but there are not so many of them lately. And while Common Cause is a potential source of influence, it lacks clout, size and cohesion. Only teachers are powerful, dedicated, educated and interested enough to exert a moderating influence on government.

The nation needs an organized group of moderates to keep it on an even keel. It could do no better than to enlist its teachers. Teachers are moderates by nature and profession. The habit of moderation which lies at the heart of teaching would be good for government, a rudder that keeps the ship of state from turning turtle, running on the rocks, or steaming in circles.

Because teachers are the only organized group of moderates in the U.S., they are the only group capable of providing balance. It is important that teachers do so. The strongest nation in the world needs to stay on an even keel. The price of

extremism has often been genocide and now could be annihilation. Balance has become a matter of survival for the nation and the species.

Puritans will find no virtue in the idea of a more active political role for teachers. One expects them to react against it, since they have already done so. But those who seek a middle-of-the-road position will not be disappointed by an expanded political role for teachers. For this is just another extension of what America and its schools have always represented: democracy, opportunity and moderation. Perhaps they will even take comfort in it, since the alternatives are terrifying.

VIII. The Future of Teaching.

What is occurring is intelligible: Teaching is being reshaped by the same forces which have transformed other professions. These forces are technological. They involve computers and their applications. These forces have transformed the business of business. Banking is no longer stuffy; insurance is no longer staid, scholarly and dull. Professionals in these businesses have been transformed. Bankers and actuaries are no longer "clerks who work like squirrels with personalities to match." They have been liberated by the computer to practice higher orders of skill.

These forces are affecting teaching. To be sure, the revolution is arriving late. Banking and insurance were transformed two decades ago. But one advantage in vicariously learning is that major problems can be avoided. And one expects a public enterprise to lag behind the well financed endeavors of the private sector. The critical factor in retooling is marginal funds. This controls the rate at which technology is introduced. So the question is not one of 'if' or 'when', but of 'how soon'. 'How soon' depends on commitments.

If we assume that technology will transform education, the future -- our commitment -- is predictable in outline. Teaching will cease to be mass canned instruction delivered from textbook to seats. Schools will cease to be places where people are sent to information stations at the sound of a bell. Relieved of the responsibility for rote, teachers will provide individualized instruction to students who learn at their own rate. Schools will be places where information will be sent to individuals on demand.

Individualized instruction will be available through interactive computer. Computers will provide lessons and drills; monitor student progress; provide remedial or enrichment strategies; allow measures of progress across grades, buildings, districts or nations; deliver specialized assistance; and provide a window on research and other professional matters. Such technology exists now.

It will transform teaching into a legitimate profession. Teachers will be empowered to regulate themselves and the learning environment. Because they will receive professional pay for professional work, many more gifted students will become teachers.

Many different specialists and paraprofessionals will be available to teachers and students. There will be statewide systems of continuing education to support the skills which practitioners and associates will need to learn throughout their careers.

A federal connection will be found to provide schools with enough money to achieve excellence. State support will be dependable. Schools will no longer have their budgets cut in mid-year by governors who balance the state's budget by cutting the schools' budget.

Principals and superintendents will be instructional leaders, and many more of them will be female.

Teaching will require more extensive and intense preparation. Teacher education programs will educate teachers who are both generalists and specialists. These programs will produce teachers who can be effective on their first day of teaching.

Universities will have sufficient resources to remain competitive and to support the economy which supports them. Community colleges will be community centers, with expanded responsibilities in economic development and culture. Private colleges will regain strength as we invest in them as an industry instead of as a subsidy.

Most of all, our children will get what they need to grow to the fullest. Like their teachers, they will be generalists with many specialized technical skills. This is what America will need to meet its military, economic and political competition. As our children become the best that they can be, America will become what it ought to be: A place for opportunity and prosperity.

There is nothing threatening in this. It's nothing more, or less, than the realization of the American Dream. For the first time, we have an opportunity to provide individual instruction on a mass basis; to insure that each student, including the average child, can be all that the child can be; to achieve equal opportunity which is divergent in outcome; to realize equity and excellence simultaneously. We can become what we believe.

The stakes are high. No nation has ever become or remained a democracy in the absence of a consistent economic surplus. Our survival as a nation and as a democracy depends on our ability to educate every student to the fullest. But we are failing. Four years after the "Nation at Risk" report, only states with reviving economies and a surplus in the treasury have made

commitments. The federal government has reduced its commitments. This is a proscription for failure. Among the countries of the world only the United States and Canada have central governments which have no responsibility to finance education. Surely Washington has major responsibilities for achieving excellence.

Our world has changed, permanently. In today's world of technology and competition, we can't prosper by doing nothing. We must adapt by doing things differently and by taking risks. But to take risks, we must have leaders who know where they want to go, who have a plan, and who don't wait until the last minute to get started. That is why education's most pressing need is vision in government. That's why education and politics are linked now and for the future. To achieve the nation's educational, economic and military objectives, we must have leaders who take risks to reduce our risks. We cannot afford failure at the top.

Our mission as teachers is clear. We must seek and achieve the prerogatives of a legitimate profession. We must apply our moderate habit of mind to the decisions around us. We must be open to new techniques and technologies. We must obtain the resources which are necessary to go from inadequacy to excellence, from stagecoach to satellite, from neglect to priority. We must continue to create power to affect the political decisions which affect education. We cannot expect to prosper if we fail to believe in ourselves and our destiny, or fail in our own commitments. We must succeed. The future depends on us.